Greetings from Japan

I had my birthday this month. Woohoo! I didn't get up to much, since I hadn't yet met the new exchange students and everyone from school was studying since schools started again and we had exams...woohoo? Regardless, my host family took me out to dinner at a sashimi bar. This isn't like in Australia with the trains. At a sashimi bar, all the sushi is made to order, so it's all fresh. It was hands down the best sashimi I have ever tasted. My Rotary club also gave me a birthday present, about 11 books, English. I have been reading a lot of books lately, since it's a god way to pass the time, and now that I have a firm grasp on the language, it doesn't detract from my studies. Woohoo! Yes, I can speak Japanese fluently, I had to learn fast as the rest of my next host families don't speak English, or do, but now refuse to speak English to me, which I don't really see as a problem as I actually prefer to speak Japanese to people. I find it quite annoying when they try to speak English to me, regardless of how good it is, it's still degrading. That would have to be the only problem that I am having over here, people don't speak enough Japanese to me which is quite a change from the first 2 months.

There are a couple large festivals going on in and around Kanazawa at the moment. Firstly, all the schools have a huge festival-cum-open day, where people can walk in and see the school, and each of the classes organizes a game or presentation. My class made a giant 3D marble rolling...thing, with dominoes and little cars and lots of demonstrations on how cause and effect works really well in theory. I helped out with the setting up and construction, cutting wood and tying things to the ceiling. The next festival was the 'Imizu Machi' festival, which celebrated the bringing of spirits down from the mountains. The other exchange students and I traveled to Imizu City to join in. The festival is held over three days, where the people push huge, 700 kilo shrines on carts. They push all thirteen of them down from the mountain and into the city, yelling 'Push! Go! Push! Go!' (In Japanese) and playing music on traditional Japanese flutes, guitars and drums. All the exchange students got to push one of the shrines through the city, although I don't think we did as good a job of it, as we seemed to have to stop a lot more than the others. It was okay though, as we pushed a good 500 metres up and down a street a few times, and really showed the Japanese how to yell. That evening, we went through the city to a temple, and watched as they covered the shrines with lanterns and pushed them down to the river. This part of the festival is more like western carnivals, with rides, stalls and attractions going on all the time. We were all completely bushed the next day.

During the holidays, our baseball team (the best in Kanazawa, thank you very much) competed in the regional tournament. As part of our schools support, we were asked to come and support the games. They were in another part of the Ishikawa Prefecture, Coshien, so there was no reason for me not to go. It was a...interesting experience, not just the game, but the trip itself told me more about Japanese mentality than I would have thought to guess. Each school class was paired up with another and put on a bus which would drive us to Coshien. While it was extremely cramped, it was also a good opportunity to show off some of my Japanese speaking skills. My classmates were surprised that Id learnt so much in only eight months. If you've ever played golf, you know how good it feels to make a perfect drive, right onto the green. That's what it feels like to speak another language well. On the trip, most of the students passed the time by playing the standard high school bus trip poker game, with all the bags piled up in the middle, with a book on top of them to make a table. I tried a couple rounds, but it seemed to have some different rules that I wasn't aware of, so I defaulted to sleeping the trip out. This proved to be a waste of time, since all the buses parked in a truck stop for the night! Sleeping in a bus isn't easy, and it's not something I want to try again. When we arrived, there was the usual shouting and scampering around that is associated with organizing students. Of course no one got lost, since all they had to do was follow the mass of people heading towards the stadium.

I now know why baseball is so famous in America. It seems to me that Americans can't actually watch a game for more than five minutes without something taking their attention away. This is proved by their disregard for cricket, which is infinitely more complex than baseball. In a baseball game, the game is only part of the attraction. There are also cheerleaders from each side, a band (in our case, the school brass band) and people who I like to refer to as 'yellers'. Their job is to make 'music' after every single hit, throw, pass, or out, and sometimes just when they felt like it. I was a 'yeller'. We were told to stand in rows, given a cone to yell into, and we had to 'sing' different songs. The game itself was quite fun to watch, but I was entirely more interested in my personal opposition across the stands, the other school and their 'yellers'. For the record, the other schools support group was weak. We could yell those kids two ways to Sunday and still be home before the cows. Our school won; (because of our yelling) it came back from a losing position in the second innings, to win the game 9-2. It was fun to watch at the start, but gradually got more boring as the monotony progressed. Hence the 'yellers'. We were awesome. We lost the next week, to a team that was actually quite good, although they were let down by their support.

So that’s about all that’s been happening in Japan for the last couple of months. It’s coming into autumn now, (a little late) which is considered one of the nicer seasons, with all the leaves turning orange. If there is one thing to say about Japan (and there is certainly more than one thing to say about it), its that it is pretty all year round.

Callan. (Kanazawa)